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AUTHOR Stelzner, Sara Latham
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ABSTRACT

A peer training system for teaching assistants (TAs) that is sponsored by the Writing Program Resource Center at the University of Massachusetts is described from the perspective of the center coordinator. The center seeks to improve teaching in the freshman composition program by providing TAs feedback in a non-threatening and understanding way by peer counselors. TAs who work with the Writing Program Resource Center are compensated for their center duties with a one-third reduction for the full TA load, which is three sections a year. The coordinator chooses new Resource Center staff members early enough to include them in planning fall workshops. At the beginning of the fall semester veteran Resource Center staff train new staff. During the first weeks of the semester, weekly meetings are held to view videotapes of actual classes and to discuss effective teaching techniques. The resource group functions as liaison between the TA staff and the director and faculty members who supervise the teachers in the program. Appendices include: the coordinator's schedule for March-December, a fall 1986 TA orientation schedule, an orientation evaluation form, a class format questionnaire, and a list of class observation categories. (SW)

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PEER TRAINING IN A TEACHING IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM FOR TAs

Sara Latham Stelzner
University Writing Program
University of Massachusetts
Amherst, Massachusetts

Presented at Conference on Employment and Education of Teaching Assistants, Ohio State University, November 18, 1986.

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Peer Training in a Teaching Improvement Program for TAs

One of the topics which we have heard a great deal about in this conference is the role conflict teaching assistants face: they must be students and teachers. On the one hand they must overcome their own anxieties about being evaluated in order to allay the fears of their students, for whom they will be the evaluators. On the other, they must not emphathize too completely to be able to maintain grading standards. Usually closer in age to their students than most professors, they enjoy rapport that may be more difficult for regular faculty to achieve; but they may have a harder time maintaining their authority as experts in their fields. Outside of the classroom they have the same time management problems that beset the rest of us, but they are newer at the game and everything takes longer. Besides deadlines for teachers and for students are not often flexible, and graduate assistants must meet both.

But teaching assistants are not the only players in an academic department who fill multiple roles. Faculty supervisors act in several capacities in situations where teaching assistants are in full or partial control of classes or laboratoies. While they are advisors, counselling TAs how to do the job, they are also evaluating their performance, and may well be the deciding voice in whether or not the assistantship is renewed. Supervisors in most job settings are

responsible for evaluation, of course, but in the case of faculty-TA relationships, the faculty member may be evaluating not only the TA's teaching, but his or her graduate work as well. Given this situation, a little T. A. paranoia is an understandable phenomenon. Thus, in dealing with a faculty supervisor the TA may be anxious and defensive, less able to accept suggestions for improvement.

The conflict between the training and the evaluation functions I have been describing is a concern of teaching improvement specialists at all levels. A special report on faculty development published by Change magazine in 1974 speaks of the need all teachers have "to get advice about teaching, try new techniques, monitor his or her own performance, receive informed and confidential criticism, observe the work of other teachers, and discuss common problems--all without prejudice to administrative decisions about tenure or salary."[1] The peer training system we're describing today is one means of meeting the teaching assistant's need to receive such "unprejudiced" feedback--to create a situation in which they can admit their doubts and concerns about their teaching to a colleague.

Employing experienced graduate student teachers to train beginning TAs doesn't solve all of the problems I've mentioned, but it does ameliorate some of the tension inherent in the role conflicts on both sides of the desk. The logic is obvious: teaching assistants understand the problems that arise from their juggling act better than anyone else, and they are actively developing strategies to cope with them. Peer trainers who are competent teachers and graduate students

are role models for beginners. They are living proof that it can be done. Also, because they are neither supervisors nor dissertation directors, peers are easier to approach for advice on classroom difficulties.

Our teaching improvement efforts in the freshman composition program at the University of Massachusetts are planned and administered by a group of several teaching assistants who staff the Writing Program Resource Center. I coordinate the Center's activities, as well as teach one course in the program--all part of my duties as an assistant director of the Writing Program. The teaching assistants who work with me are compensated for their Resource Center duties with a 1/3 reduction of the full TA load, which is three sections a year. Thus all of us are teaching one course every semester. The number of resource center TAs varies according to the size of the program in any given year. This semester there are four staff members, and 77 graduate students teaching in the Program.

The physical setting for the Resource Center is actually my office and an adjoining one where we keep a library and resource files. The program director and I choose the four or five students who work with me. The qualifications we look for are demonstrated teaching ability and interest in the training program. Staff members serve until they leave the campus or decide to do something else. Since teaching the writing course is a requirement for Resource Center staff members, graduate students who choose to teach advanced English courses or

direct the undergraduate peer tutoring center, or simply quit teaching to devote more time to their graduate work are no longer eligible for the staff. Not only is it important that staff members share the TA experience with their constituency, but they should be a visible presence in the Program, available for informal exchanges with their peer colleagues.

The teaching assistant staff members work with me to plan all the training activities we undertake from pre-semester workshops to the Friday paycheck coffee hour for TAs. Their most time-consuming job, once the semester begins, is video-taping first-year colleagues. In the papers that follow, Karen and Paul describe these activities in detail; my emphasis is on my role as coordinator of the teacher training program in which the bulk of the training is done by peers.

The Coordinator's calendar starts with the Spring semester because that's when planning for September begins. We try to choose new Resource Center staff members early enough to be included in planning Fall workshops. I solicit suggestions from the Resource Center staff for revisions of the Instructor's Handbook. We survey returning teachers to compile a list of those willing to be mentors to the incoming group of new TAs.

During the summer I work with the office staff to disseminate necessary information to the appropriate groups--lists of the teaching staff indicating which are newcomers; mentor-mentee assignments, the

schedule for fall orientation, and the revised handbook.

At the beginning of the Fall semester veteran Resource Center staff members train new staff, since we usually lose at least one person every year. We meet weekly during the first weeks of the semester to view video-tapes of actual classes and discuss effective and ineffective teaching techniques. I particularly enjoy these sessions because they provide a rare opportunity to discuss teaching. We use the tapes as a basis for role-play sessions in which different members of the group discuss the class with the teacher. We discuss what to look for when observing a class--organization of class time, seating arrangements, classroom interaction patterns, etc. We discuss the types of questions teachers ask.

In addition to staff training activities,our weekly meetings provide new ideas for training sessions and activities and suggestions for the administration about improving the TA's lot. I remember one particular instance when threatened cuts in program funding caused concern among the teaching staff that they would not be reappointed; they had questions about the criteria for reappointment. The Resource Center TAs felt that the Director should address this concern, and he drafted a memo to circulate to the staff, so at least they were assured that reappointment decisions were not capricious. The next year the Resource Center staff felt that there was a low level of paranoia and we let sleeping anxieties lie.

The Resource group functions as liaison between the TA staff and the director and faculty members who supervise the teachers in the

program. These faculty "course directors" as we call them work with groups of eight to ten veteran and beginning teaching assistants. It is the course directors who visit classes and evaluate the TA for reappointment. The Resource Center staff attends one or two meetings a year with the Director and these faculty members. One of our major concerns at the moment is finding ways to coordinate our training activities with the Course Directors' efforts.

A matter of some concern to the graduate students who work in the Resource Center is that their liason function will be misunderstood by their colleagues. It is important that they not be viewed as leaders in a "company union," or as spies for the program administration. The staff members are very sensitive to this problem; their credibility as counselors and helpers to their peers depends on their not being involved in any way in teacher evaluation and supervision. Although the Program requires a formal teacher evaluation at the end of each semester, Resource Center staff members don't have access to the evaluation, nor do they participate in personnel decisions.

One of my responsibilities is to remind the faculty that they cannot have access to information the peer trainers have as a result of working with colleagues or to the videotapes they make of other TAs' classes. Because I am a course director and do participate in hiring and reappointment decisions, I don't do video-tape counselling myself. Although I wear two hats, I work hard to keep the roles of helper and supervisor separate.

One means of keeping members of our large program aware of what's going on--both in the Resource Center and in the other components--"main office," teaching staff, Course Directors--is the monthly Newsletter edited by a teaching assistant who works with me. The Resource Center members contribute information and use the letter to announce our activities. A section called"Classnotes" includes suggestions from members of the teaching staff about class activities they have tried. Each issue includes notes from the Program Director,usually reporting "good news" of some recognition the program has received. Of course we announce accomplishments and publications of Program personnel.

Another aspect of our training program which is managed entirely by graduate assistants is the production of training videotapes. We've brought one of those to show you at the end of today's program.

I think the members of the panel would agree with me that those of us who work in teacher training feel we probably learn more than those we teach. The most fruitful discussions of teaching I have had have been in Resource Center staff meetings. The truism that comes to mind when I discuss using graduate students in a teaching improvement program for TAs is no less valid because it is a cliche:"the best teachers are those who are learning themselves." There is no substitute for the energy and enthusiasm of these beginning teachers who are trying to find ways to help their students learn. The value of their contributions from the beginning of the Resource Center thirteen years ago cannot be underestimated. Although

we can't prove a causal connection, we like to think that our training efforts contributed to the success of the nine Writing Program teaching assistants who have received campus-wide Distinguished Teaching Awards during the time we've been in existence. Last year two of our teachers were winners.

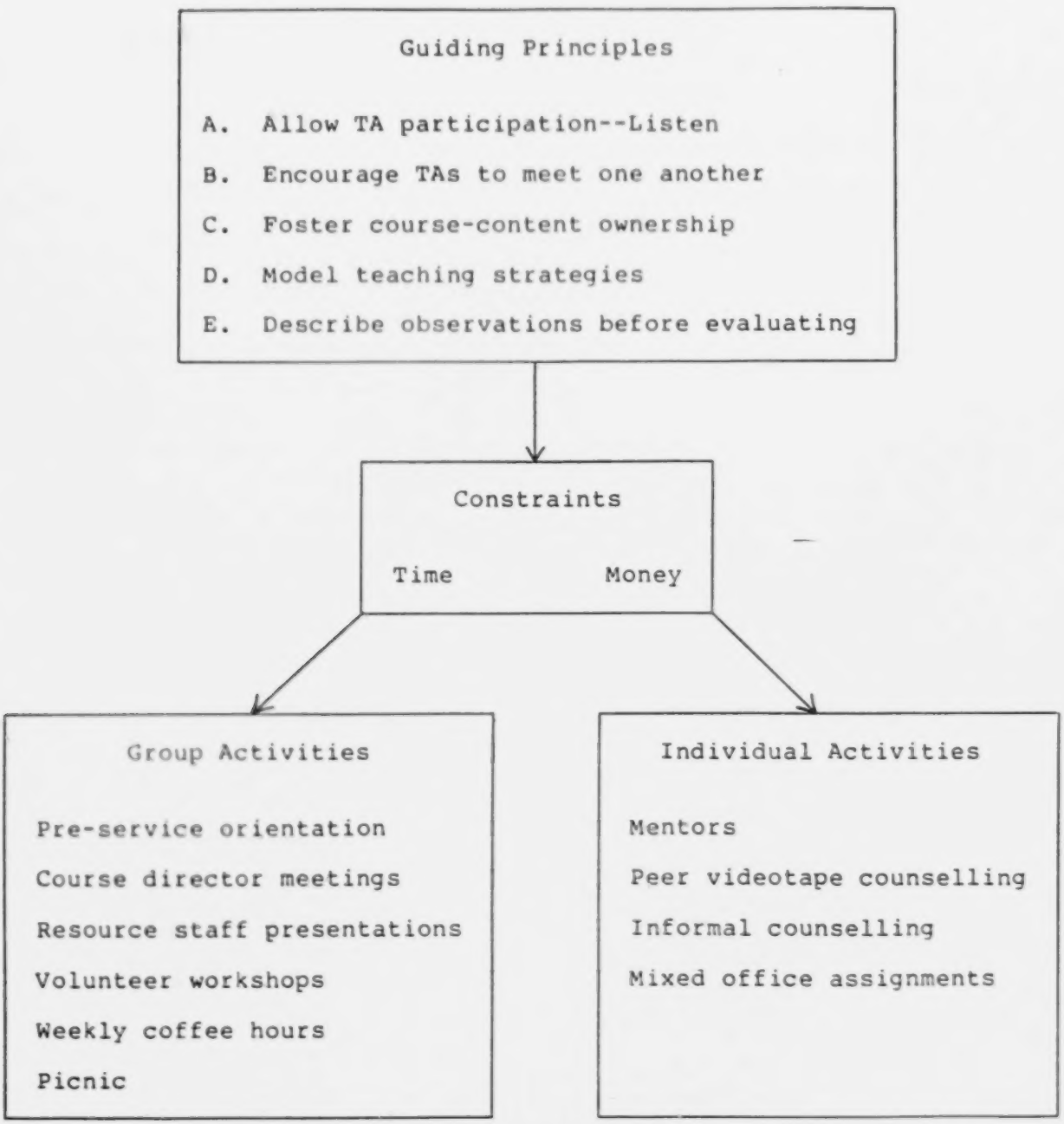
Now Karen Strickland will describe her role as a Resource Center staff member in planning and implementing group teacher training activities, and Paul Puccio will describe one-to-one peer peer counseling.

[1]Group for Human Development in Higher Education, Faculty Development in a Time of Retrenchment, 1976.

COORDINATOR'S CALENDAR

Month	Activity
March-April	Interviewing and hiring TA's for following September-dates of August orientation meetings included in letters to new TA's
April-May	Appointment of new members to Resource Center staff so they can be included in planning meetings for Fall workshops
	Planning for orientation workshops
	Soliciting mentors for Fall semester
July	Mailings to all writing program staff which include Fall orientation schedule and Course Director Assignment list which stars all new WP staff members
	List of paired mentor-mentee assignments sent to all mentors; same list included in packets for new staff members
August	Two-day Orientation Workshops just before semester begins
September	Social events designed to introduce new staff members to veterans--cider and cheese party; staff picnic
	Training sessions for new Resource Center staff begin
	Organization of video-taping: schedules and assignments
	Follow-up for mentors: memo listing mentee's phone number
	Appointment of Newsletter editor; schedule of publication dates
October	Evaluation of orientation workshops
	Evaluation of mentor system
	Coordination of "in-service" workshops
November-December	Hiring-Orientation process begins again for Spring semester

PEER TRAINING PROGRAM



Orientation Schedule
Fall 1986

Thursday, August 28 and Friday, August 29: New teaching assistants required to attend; all others welcome.
Tuesday, September 2: All Writing Program Staff

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Thursday, August 28 - Herter 102

9:00-9:15 Introductions

9:15-10:00 Overview: Teaching in the Writing Program--Charlie Moran

10:00-10:30 Coffee Break (Coffee and muffins will be served.)

10:30-11:30 Writing Exercises--Charlie Moran

11:30-12:30 Peer Editing--Sarah Sloane and Karen Strickland

12:30-1:30 Lunch

1:30-3:00 Using Student Writing in the Classroom--Bill Clements and Paul Puccio

3:00-4:00 Universities, Discourse, Communities and Writing Across the Curriculum--Anne Herrington

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Friday, August 29 - Herter 102

9:00-10:00 Responding to Student Papers--Charlie Moran

10:00-10:15 Break

10:15-11:30 Establishing Criteria for Student Writing--Charlie Moran

11:30-12:15 A Word from the Ombudswoman: Annette Rottenberg (Appeal process, plagiarism, avoiding problems)

12:15-1:45 Brownbag with the Resource Center staff: What to do the first day of class. (**Everyone should bring a brown bag lunch; we'll provide coffee, cider, and cookies.**)

1:45-3:00 Video of Teaching Styles--Sarah Sloane

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Tuesday, September 2

Morning: Meetings with new staff members who want to discuss their syllabi

1:00-2:00 General Meeting for all Writing Program Teaching Staff -- Herter Auditorium (Herter 227)

2:00-3:30 Course Directors' Meetings with Groups

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Friday, Sept. 5

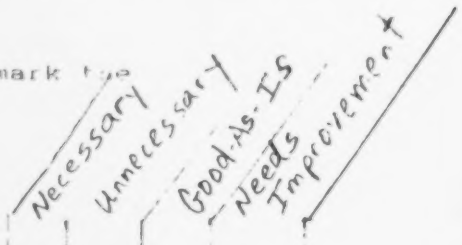
4:00--? PICNIC (Bring salad, dessert or snacks. Beverages, hotdogs and hamburgers will be provided.)

Fall 1986 Orientation Evaluation

Now that the semester is well underway you are asked to take a few minutes and evaluate the orientation sessions you attended on August 28 and 29, 1986. We are always revising the orientation and need your feedback to ensure we make the sessions as valuable as possible.

Part I

Beside each activity listed below, please mark the appropriate column.



	Necessary	Unnecessary	Good-As-Is	Needs Improvement
Overview-Teaching in the Writing Program --Charlie Moran				
Writing Exercises--Charlie Moran				
Peer Editing--Sarah Sloane and Karen Strickland				
Using Student Writing in the Classroom --Paul Puccio and Bill Clements				
Universities, Discourse, Commmunities and Writing across the curriculum--Anne Herrington				
Responding to Student Papers--Charlie Moran				
Establishing Criteria for Student Writing Charlie Moran				
Word from the Ombudswoman--Annette Rottenberg				
Brownbag lunch with Resource Center Staff				
Video of Teaching Styles--Sarah Sloane				

Part II

1. For any part that you marked "Needs Improvement" could you make specific suggestions?

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2. For any part you marked "Unnecessary," please tell why.

3. Now that you've been teaching, which session has proved to be the most valuable? Why?

4. Which session was the least valuable? Why?

5. What topics do you think should be included in the next orientation?

6. If you have any other comments or suggestions we should hear, please note them below.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Please return it to Karen Strickland's mailbox by Friday, October 24, 1986.

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CLASS OBSERVATION-CATEGORIES

The following are categories to consider when visiting a class. They are descriptive. The appropriateness of a given type of question or response depends on the situation and the instructor's purpose.

ORGANIZATION

Content: Introduces topic, previews material to be covered, relates it to past and future. Establishes set and achieves closure.

Time: Use of time consistent with goals of lesson, difficulty of material, etc. Variety of activities.

Space: Physical arrangement of classroom.

MATERIALS

Texts, readings
Writing assignments, quizzes, exercises, games, class activites
Examples, illustrations, and applications to student experience
Use of blackboards, hand-outs, audio-visual aids

DISCUSSION

Patterns of Interaction
- Teacher-centered: teacher-to-student, student-to-teacher
- Student-centered: student-to-student; students take initiative in raising questions and volunteering information
- Small group, pairs

Types of Teacher Questions
- Information: "Recitation" questions designed to test student knowledge or reinforce learning.
- Application: "Can you identify?" "Reword," etc.
- Evaluation: Asking for evaluation or opinion
- Process: Asking for student feedback. "Should we discuss A or B first?"

Teacher Responses to Student Answers
- Positive or negative reinforcement: acceptance, approval, praise or rejection or correction
- Probe: "What do you mean?" "Can you give an example?" "Is that what you meant?"
- Redirect: Ask another student to comment on first answer
- Restate student's answer
- Answers own question

NON-VERBAL BEHAVIOR

Delivery skills
Response to student contributions

Suggested Strategies for Analyzing Questions in the Classroom

Levels of Questions

To assess the levels of questions that you most frequently ask videotape or audiotape* one of your classes. Listen to the tape and categorize the questions you asked using Sanders' Taxonomy of Questions. At the end of the tape tally up the number of questions that you asked at each level. Did most or even a disproportionate amount of questions that you asked fallinto the knowledge category? Do your questions challenge students? Do your questions require students to use higher cognitive processes?

*A peer observer may be used. Observer should pose the information during the class. Follow up class with an informal session with the observer to review date and and solicit feedback.

Planning Your Question

Before class construct some questions (preferably ones that require higher levels of thinking). Planning effective questions is the start to asking effective questions. Write them down and being them to class. Make a real effort to work these questions into your class. Reserve a few minutes at the end of the class to give the students all or several of the questions in the form of a written (non-graded) quiz. After class look over the answers to the questions. You shoudd be able to determine by their answers if your questions have been effective.

Writing Questions

Try writing some sample questions at each cognitive level discussed by Bloom or Sanders. (1) Think of a topic from one of your courses and write 7 questions, one at each cognitive level. (2) After you have done this, ask yourself what types of responses you would expect from students. (3) Compare your questions and expected responses with Bloom's and/or Sanders' Taxonomy. (4) Record your reactions. (5) Decide what you could do to improve your writing of questions at the various levels. (6) Share this exercise with a colleague and ask him/her to r react to your questions, analyses and suggestions. (7) To take it one step further try planning and asking some higher order questions in class. (8) You may then want to videotape or audiotape a class and analyse the questions you asked.

Classroom Questions vs. Test Questions

Do you ask the same types of questions in class as you do on tests? Find out! (1) Audiotape or videotape* a typical class session. (2) Review the tape and note the questions that you asked. (3) Identify the level of thinking that each question required. (4) Now, looking over several old exams, determine the level of questions posed on the exams. (5) Compare the levels of questions that your asked in the classroom with the levels of those asked on your exams. Are they similar? Do the types of classroom questions you ask prepare students for the types of exam questions you pose? If you ask a lot of knowledge questions in class yet pose questions on the tests that demand higher cognitive processes preparing students for the exam situation?

*A peer observer may be used.

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Amount of Questions

To assess just how many questions you ask in class videotape or audiotape* a regular class session. After class play back the tape and record the number of questions that you asked. Note the amount of class time you spent asking questions. Are you asking too many questions? Are you asking too few?

Variations:

1. While listening to the tape record the amount of teacher-asked questions (T) and also student-asked questions (S). Determine the ration of T/S. You will discover who has all the "airtime" in class.

2. While listening to the tape record each teacher-asked question. Who is answering your questions? Are many questions going unanswered? Are you answering them yourself?

3. While listening to the tape record each teacher question, the response generated, and your reaction. This will give you a good profile of the SOLICITATION-RESPONSE-REACTION question cycle.

*A peer or student observer may be used.

Convergent-Divergent Questions

Questions can be classified as convergent or divergent. Convergent questions have only one possible answer. Such questions drastically limit the field of potential answers. Conversely, divergent questions save more than one answer calling for a wide variety of responses drawn from a vast pool. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. To see which kind of question you predominately ask you can videotape or audiotape* a class session. Replay the tape and categorize each question as CONVERGENT or DIVERGENT. Which type of question did you use most frequently? Can you identify any difference in on the class when divergent as opposed to convergent questions were asked?

*A peer or student observer may be used.

The Questioning Strategies Observation System

If you want a very critical, indepth look at your questioning then maybe the Questioning Strategies Observation System is for you. The QSOS was developed at the University of Texas at Austin to record verbal behaviors occuring in the classroom which are associated with the teachers' use of questions. It designates 24 categories of behavior. To pursue this avenue would requite extensive observer training (at least 15 hours) but would provide an all inclusive profile of question asking. Reading, "The Questioning Strategies Observation System" by Morse and Davis first might be a good place to start if one is seriously considering this method. A modified QSOS would also, no doubt, be an adequate assessment technique.

Matching Questions with Materials[1]

Different types of materials can trigger different levels of questions. For example, books which are very explicit have a tendency to cue and foster the formation of knowledge and comprehension questions. Textbooks often fall into this

[1]Frances Hunkins, Involving Students in Questioning. (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc. 1976), 158.

category. On the other hand, primary source materials such as letters, legal documents, charts, mathematical formulas, or photographs lend themselves more readily to question-asking geared to higher cognitive levels. Even using historical novels, biographies, or the like foster the asking of higher order questions. Try organizing a class session or even a unit around primary data sources. Carefully plan your questions prior to class and then videotape or audiotape the class session. While reviewing the tape, notice your solicitation--response-reaction cycle. What level questions were you asking most often? Can you see a difference in your class' responses when you use primary data sources rather than a textbook?

Writing Program for Instructional Development

CLASS FORMAT QUESTIONNAIRE

Instructor:

Course:

Date of Class: Time: Location:

What is the content, subject matter, or purpose of the class session? (list if more than one)

What do you want the students to have learned or to be able to do better as a result of this class session?

What are you going to be doing in class to foster this result?

What do you expect students to be doing during the session?

Is there any aspect of your role that you would like to focus on when viewing this lesson?

When can you view the resulting videotape?

When can we meet together?

VIDEO-TAPING RECORD

Instructor _____ Counselor _____

___ Taping Date _____

___ Counseling Session Date _____

___ Suggested Follow-up: _____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

The Resource Center Staff has my permission to use this tape only in the teacher training program, not for personnell evaluation.

SIGNATURE _____